【Original article】

Improving In-Class Output with Pre-Class Input

Andrew Pharis

Gifu University Part-time lecturer

Abstract

In this paper, the researcher outlines efforts to provide students in a mixed-level English Communication course with access to online content prior to classroom lessons with a goal of freeing up class time spent clarifying class instructions and reviewing grammar thereby allowing more time for in-context communicative activities and feedback. Content was selected largely based on students' needs as identified through class observations and from multiple questionnaires administered to the students.

The feedback from this pilot study found that students reported feeling more confident communicating during class time. Additional feedback was provided on what sort of content might be useful for future lessons. The results of this pilot study are meant to open a discussion on the potential merits of helping students to attend to their own language needs outside of class in order to optimize class time for practicing the language in context.

Keywords: Online, English, Video, Mixed-Level, Speaking

Presently in Japan, English as a foreign language is a required class beginning in secondary school (Hino, 2009). Classroom instruction tends to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and more recently listening comprehension (Sasaki, 2008). Students tend to reach a point where they are able to earn satisfactory scores on standardized tests but struggle to effectively communicate in the language (Yamauchi, 2009).

Japanese university entrance exams commonly test English language ability. However, successful exam scores may not necessarily reflect communicative ability. Brown and Yamashita (1995) found in their study that these exams typically require little or no production of the language with no spoken English at all. Upon completion of high school and university entrance exams,

students regularly enter compulsory English communication courses where this gap in their language ability is finally brought to the fore (Yamauchi, 2009).

While conducting observations in just such a setting at a local university, many of the students participating in speaking activities were found to have difficulty forming sentences. Many of the mistakes were with basic grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement, singular and plural nouns, verb tense agreement). The teacher noticed that the students would not ask for clarification but would simply become increasingly reticent to speak. Some students appeared to need to have the grammar reviewed and the professor was observed often deviating from the communicative activities he had prepared to instead address these points. It seemed that if the students were able to have some of these points reviewed or otherwise addressed prior to class time then it would allow the professor to return to focusing on practicing the language in class. It also seemed that students tended to misunderstand or not fully understand details about the instructions given for the in-class activities. These observations gave rise to a couple of questions: If students were to be provided content that they could access outside of class, would this better prepare them to effectively engage in the communicative activities planned during class time? Also, would the students make use of such content if it were provided to them?

Providing students with content to explore and engaging in authentic activities are central tenets of constructivist theory (Ormrod, 2011). As Shih (2011) notes, "blended learning that integrates online and face-to-face instruction could create an effective teaching and learning experience for both instructors and students" (p. 831). Further, online resources can help ESL students who may be reluctant to speak up in such settings to engage more (Shih, 2011). In this pilot study, background on the sites and participants where the research was conducted will be provided. Descriptions of the online content that included videos and assignments, which were to be viewed and completed by the students outside of class, prior to class time will also be included. An explanation of how data was collected and analyzed will be given. Finally, the paper will include discussion of the research findings, interpretations and implications.

Sites and Participants

The pilot study was conducted at a private university a small city in central Japan. The faculty mission statement is "to be internationally recognized as a global leader in business communication education and to produce outstanding graduates with exceptional ability in English, Chinese or other Asian languages" (K. Watson, personal communication, October 4, 2012). The faculty vision is "to become recognized as one of the top three most progressive and innovative faculties in Japan in the field of language education and business communication studies" (K. Watson, personal communication, October 4, 2012). The school boasts as part of its library with over 220,000 books a Self Access Center (SAC) where students have free access to computers and the Internet. The

participants in this study were 18 first year undergraduate university students enrolled in an *English Communication I* course. All students were native Japanese speakers. Their TOEIC (Teaching of English for International Communication) scores placed them at beginner to intermediate levels. Participants were selected at the recommendation of the professor who instructed this course and because of the researcher's interests in addressing the needs of Japanese university students who wished to better develop their English language communication skills.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this research, students completed three series of questionnaires: one prior to the development of the online content, one after having viewed the first two videos and having completed the subsequent assignments and a third questionnaire to gather feedback after students had viewed the third video. The first two questionnaires were printed and administered in class. The third and final questionnaire was made available online and print copies were provided during class. All responses were kept voluntary and anonymous to encourage candid responses. The quantitative data from the first two questionnaires was used primarily to inform the content included in the online videos. It is thus discussed in the research management section below. The quantitative data from the third questionnaire is displayed in various graphs and figures in the research finings section below.

The first questionnaire, provided in Japanese, consisted of eleven questions asking students to rate their feelings about language learning and seven questions about the students' particular learning situation. Participants were asked to respond on a scale of one (*this is never or almost never true*) to five (*this is always or almost always true*). This data was recorded and noticeable spikes in responses were used to help inform the content included in the videos made available online to the students (see Graph 1). Additionally, two open-ended questions asking students to list their interests (see Table 1) and challenges (see Table 2) with regard to aspects of language learning were recorded, coded and ranked according to aspect.

The second questionnaire, provided in English with snapshots from the videos, included six questions asking participants to rate whether or not they found the various features included in the videos helpful on a scale of one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). This data was recorded and displayed in a bar graph (see Graph 2).

The third questionnaire, provided in Japanese, asked students to indicate again which features of the videos they found helpful (see Graph 3), to select from a list of various additional features they would like to see included in future videos (see Figure 1), and to rate how they would describe completing online tasks prior to coming to class (see Figure 2). They were also asked to rate how easy they found it to access the videos online on a scale of one (*difficult*) to five (*very easy*) (see Graph 4). Finally, participants were asked to rate how helpful they found the particular

assignments that accompanied the videos on a scale of one (*not helpful at all*) to five (*very helpful*) (see Graph 5). This data is included in the research findings section below.

Finally, following several discussions leading up to, during and after providing the online content to the students, the professor provided feedback in a brief interview. The professor's feedback is recapped in the research findings section below.

Research Management

The first questionnaire was administered in class in early May and collected the same day. The data collected provided a few insights and reaffirmed some observations. First, it showed (perhaps not surprisingly) that the students preferred to learn through games. Second, students preferred to work either in small groups or as a whole class more than working alone or in pairs. Third, it revealed some lack of confidence in the students' understandings of the explanations, instructions and class objectives provided in class. The open-ended questions confirmed that students found *speaking/communicating* in the language to be the most interesting but also the most challenging aspect of learning another language. *Grammar* followed *speaking/communicating* as the second most challenging aspect of learning another language.
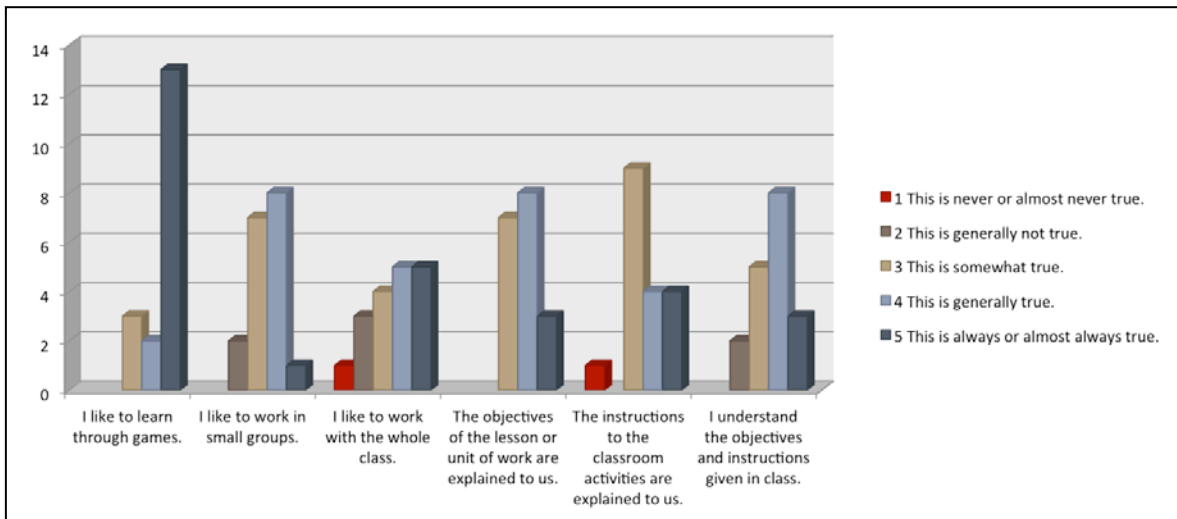
Graph 1

Questionnaire 1 – Highlights

Table 1

Student Comments by Rank – Aspects You Find Most Interesting About Learning Another Language

Domain	Number
Speaking/Communication	22
Pronunciation	4
Vocabulary	3
Culture	2
Listening	1
Grammar	1
Reading/Writing	0

Table 2

Student Comments by Rank – Aspects You Find Most Challenging About Learning Another Language

Domain	Number
Speaking/Communication	18
Grammar	12
Pronunciation	6
Vocabulary	6
Culture	1
Listening	1
Reading/Writing	1

The data led to modifications of the content of the videos. Beyond providing examples of the appropriate syntactical structures to be used in the various classroom activities it seemed useful to also discuss the contexts in which these structures would commonly be found. Also, given that the data showed there to be confusion about class objectives, instructions and expectations, it seemed necessary to explicitly state these points in the videos.

The first two videos were developed in early June. Given the limited access to the class, lessons were selected as they fit the timeline for the study. Following the syllabus for the course then, the topics for the first two videos were *Verbal Cues* and *Agreeing and Disagreeing* respectively. Both videos followed a structure that included: a brief review of previous topics

covered in class (in order to tie the lessons together), an introduction of the new topic, a list of unit objectives, background and context of the topic (drawing connections to the students' L1), some examples of common mistakes made when trying to use the target language, examples of correct usage of the target language, references to additional examples found in the course textbook and class expectations. The examples of the target language were provided visually and/or audibly using voice actors. In order to better tie the individual lessons together the videos began and ended with a graphic organizer that displayed the units covered over the entire course. Once completed, the videos were uploaded to a YouTube channel. A graphics blog or "glog" was created using the educator social media site www.edu.glogster.com. The videos were linked to the page http://pharis.edu.glogster.com/ec-i, which also provided instructions on viewing the videos and how to complete the accompanying tasks. Following the video topics, student tasks included writing down and bringing to class three verbal cues and printing and completing a worksheet giving sentences agreeing and disagreeing respectively. Five days before each class students were sent emails that included instructions on how to view the videos and complete the assignments. The emails included links to the glog and assignments.

A second questionnaire was administered in class following the second video. Students were asked to rate the usefulness of the various sections of the videos. Graph 2 shows that responses were largely, however not entirely, positive. Feedback from the second questionnaire was used to improve the content of the third and final video.

Graph 2

Questionnaire 2 – Feedback From First Two Videos
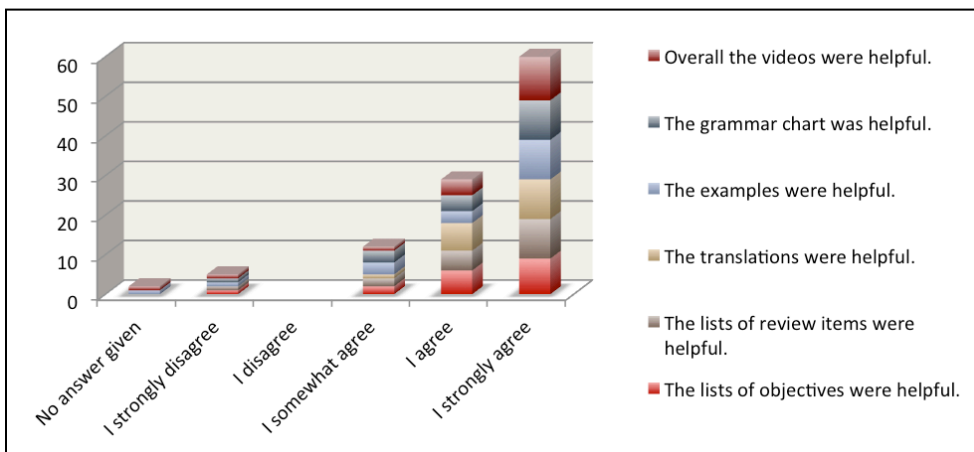
The third video was developed in early July. The topic *natural conversation* served as a lead in to the professor's summative assessment where students would engage in 45-minute conversations on various topics, employing the various communication strategies taught throughout the course.

Viewed as a daunting assignment for the students, the video followed the format of the previous two videos but included words of encouragement and tips for successfully completing the assignment.

Following the video, students were directed to a link on the website where they were able to complete the third questionnaire hosted by the web survey host site www.surveymonkey.com. Print copies were provided in class for students who had not completed the survey online prior to class.

Research Findings and Interpretations

All 18 students in the class completed all three questionnaires though in rare instances questions were left unanswered (see Graph 2). Data from the third questionnaire was positive and provided valuable insights. For example, amongst the different sections where content was provided in English only or in English and Japanese, students did not always prefer to have the Japanese accompaniment. Students reported finding the translations of certain words in Japanese to be helpful, but did not respond as strongly to translations of entire sentences. Students found explanations of the grammar in English to be more helpful than explanations of the grammar in Japanese. Finally, students reported that they found the lists of objectives and, to a lesser extent, the class expectations to be helpful.

Graph 3

*Questionnaire 3 - Which of the Following Did You Find Helpful About the Videos?*
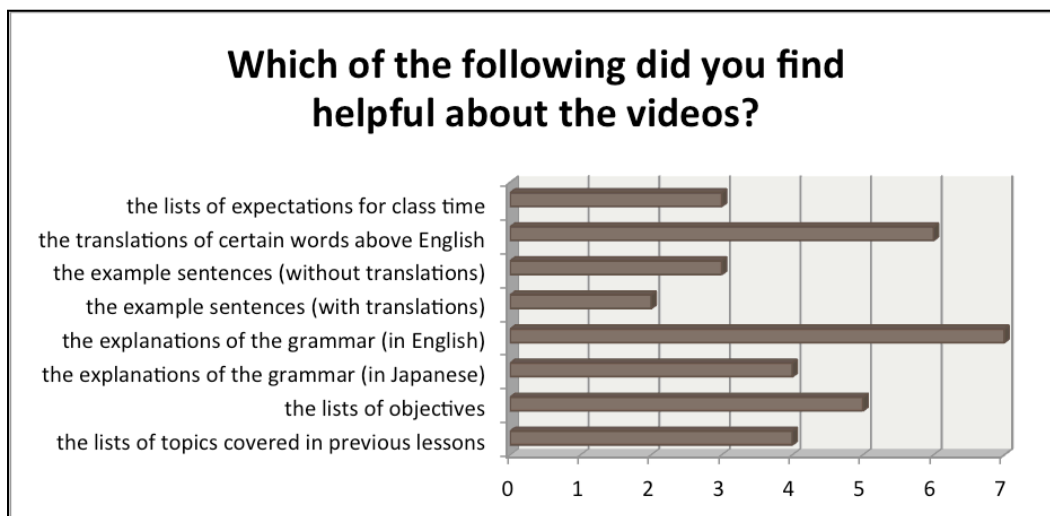
Also useful was the feedback provided on what alternate features the students would like to see included in future videos. There was far less interest in being provided full explanations in Japanese or subtitles in Japanese than there was in being provided more examples but with real

people in real world situations including common mistakes made with real people in real world situations.

Figure 1

Questionnaire 3 - Which of the Following Would You Like to See Included in Future Videos?
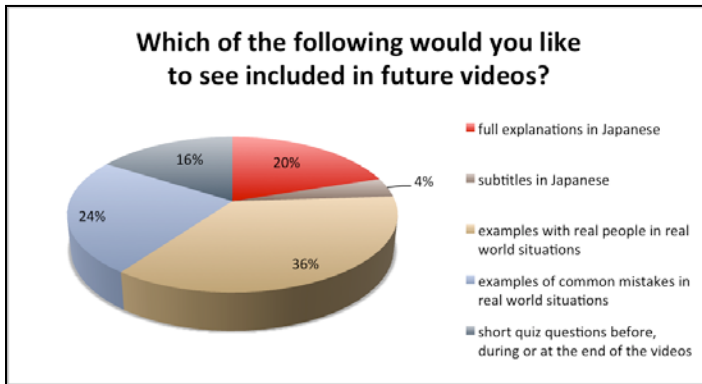
Additional responses were encouraging. Students overwhelmingly found completing this sort of assignment to be interesting, helpful and fun. Not entirely positive, several students reported having at least some difficulty accessing the content online. This was consistent with multiple warnings found in the literature review conducted that providing step-by-step instructions for the students in the use of this new technology was necessary (King, 2012; Hong, 2010; Yamauchi, 2009; Lim et al., 2009). Finally, the post-video assignments were rated favorably.

Figure 2

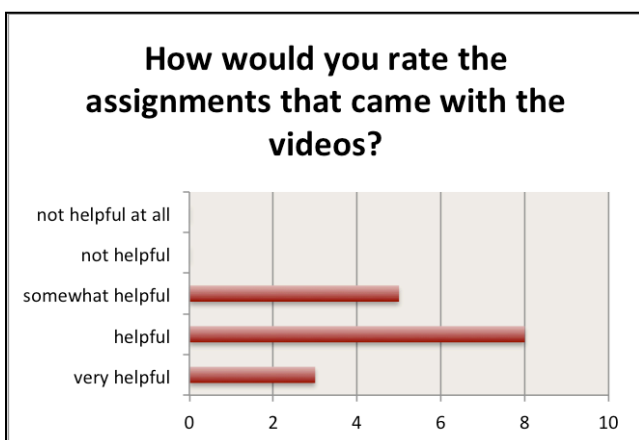*Questionnaire 3 – How Would You Describe Completing Assignments Like This Online Before Class?*
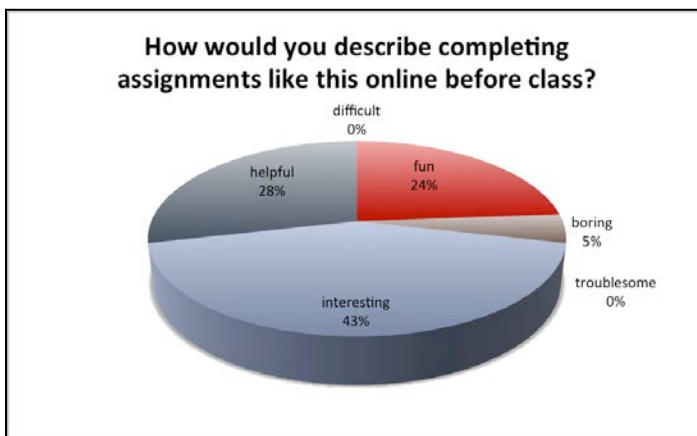
Graph 4

Questionnaire 3 – How Easy Was It to Access the Videos and the Assignments on the Website?
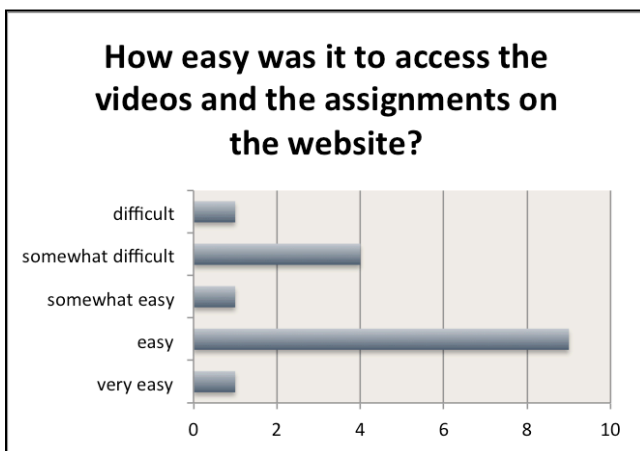
Graph 5

Questionnaire 3 – How Would You Rate the Assignments That Came With the Videos?

Data collected throughout the project was valuable. However, due to limitations in access to the students, fell short of fully answering the research questions. Would being provided content to access outside of class better prepare students to effectively engage in the communicative activities planned during class time? Would the students make use of such content if it were provided to them? To the latter, the students responded positively and the data suggests that this sort of content could possibly have wider applications. However, from the data it was not possible to determine whether or not being provided the videos resulted in a reduction of class time spent reviewing the target language and addressing issues with grammar. It may be possible that by extending the use of this sort of content, more of the grammar issues previously observed might be resolved.

In the interview with the professor, it was noted that the students had responded positively to the videos and that the videos improved over time. He felt the videos used a level of English appropriate for the students and that the content tied the individual units together nicely. He acknowledged that there was a learning curve that he and the students had to adjust to but felt this was manageable. Also, he felt that the videos would have continued to improve if expanded over an entire term. Regarding the reduction in class time he reported still needing to tend to grammar issues and take time to check for comprehension but felt again that over a longer period of time with the help of these videos this may have become less necessary. His strongest criticism echoed sentiments from the literature review, namely taking time to teach the students how to use this newer technology. He acknowledged that step-by-step instructions were provided via email and on the website but felt an in-class demonstration possibly with time for students to come up and access the information on a computer would have resulted in all students participating more fully throughout the project. The professor also suggested that shorter videos with simpler content building to larger videos with more content may have been useful for further scaffolding the use of the online content.

Implications

The strong positive feedback from the students as well as the professor suggests that the work here could possibly have broader applications and implications and should perhaps be explored further. Providing students with online content allows for the extension of practice outside of the classroom (Alm, 2008), it provides more opportunity for learners to work at their own pace (Shih, 2011; Mohamad, 2009) and can support learners of various levels (Yamauchi, 2009). Also, for students who may be reticent to speak in class, being able to access material individually outside of class can reduce the sense of fear or pressure that may be experienced in class (Shih, 2011; Kim, 2008).

While the use of this sort of instruction might not be available to students in every educational setting, hosting content online does make it easier for students who do not have access to proprietary learning software. Also, this medium gives teachers an opportunity to make content specifically for their learners: targeting student weaknesses and essential learning needs.

It is important to reiterate that depending on the students use of this sort of instruction should be accompanied with careful step-by-step instruction up to and possibly including an in-class demonstration.

Insofar as the data collected in this study was not sufficient to justify concrete conclusions, further research into the applicability of this sort of pre-class instruction may be warranted. For example, studies including control groups might lead to further insight as to whether or not this sort of instruction may positively increase the amount of time spent communicating in the students' L2 in class. Also due to unforeseen findings such as the students preferring to have Japanese used

minimally to translations and subtitles suggests further research into the most preferred template for this sort of content in this format is needed.

Conclusion

Student interest in learning to effectively communicate in a foreign language remains high despite the experience of learning environments that disproportionately focus on certain aspects of language. Today, teachers who are committed to finding ways to further support students of various levels have a multitude of options with the technology and online resources available. By making use of such resources, teachers can provide students with the additional support that can make the difference between modest progress in language ability and the ability to effectively communicate. Through this pilot study one possible way to provide students such support has been demonstrated. The positive feedback gathered from the students may be of use to any educator who has found it difficult at times to keep students in mixed-level classes engaged in their ESL learning. One final goal of this pilot study is that it inspires further discussion and consideration of ways in which to employ online resources to better connect with students.

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Appendix

Website 'http://pharis.edu.glogster.com/ec-i/'

クラス前インプットによるクラス内アウトプットの向上

ファリス・アンドリュー

岐阜大学 非常勤講師

要旨

　本研究では混合レベルのクラスの学生に授業前にオンラインによる学習の機会を与えることで，授業において説明や文法の復習にかかる時間を減らし，コミュニケーション活動やフィードバックに時間を持たせる実践を行った。オンライン学習の内容は主に授業見学や学生へのアンケートから学生のニーズに合わせたものを選定した。

　学生にとってオンライン学習の内容が有益であったことがこのパイロットスタディからわかる。学生は授業内で自信を持ってコミュニケーションを取ることができた。さらに，今後の授業においてどのような内容が有益であるかわかった。このパイロットスタディの成果は，学生それぞれの言語学習のニーズを授業外で満たすことによって，授業ではコンテクストを重視して言語学習に取り組むことができるという潜在的な長所についての議論を始めるためのものである。

キーワード：　オンライン，英語，ビデオ，混合レベル，スピーキング